



## CHAPTER ONE

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# THE OFFICE AS INVENTION

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*The office is as it is today because that's how we imagined it yesterday.*

The office isn't God-given. It's an invention. We can change it. Changes are often forced by circumstances: the need to expand or consolidate operations; a strategic shift to new products, activities, or regions; a merger or acquisition. In other cases, workspace changes are driven less by objective physical requirements than by a CEO's desire to shake up the status quo, promote new ways of working, or make a statement about the organization and what it values. But any change of workspace, whether a move to a new building or reconfiguration of a single department, can have enormous impact on the life of an organization and its people. For most of us who work in offices, few things are as tangible and emotionally charged as the physical setting in which we operate.

The office as we know it today has evolved in response to particular expectations, activities, technologies, economic conditions, worker demographics, and social values. We may attribute decisions about a company's workspace to a tidy world of functionality, but life is more complicated. Much of current office design is justified by untested assumptions and unstated values. Is it really so obvious that co-locating everyone on a corporate campus improves communication and collaboration across business units? Or that an open plan environment is unsuitable for jobs requiring a high level of concentration?

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## Send the Intended Message

The workplace is not always what it seems. It doesn't always work the way we think, or wish it did. Like any good story, it's as much a product of our aspirations and imagination—and our fears and anxieties—as our rationality. Workspace design can convey, more clearly than we might desire, just what we value. The physical cues of the office send environmental messages. Some are intentional, some not. We pay attention to physical cues precisely because they seem less consciously controlled than verbal expressions such as a mission statement or corporate values statement. I have never found an organization, for example, that proudly proclaimed, "People are *not* our most important asset." But I've found lots of offices sending that message unintentionally through mean and dingy "break rooms" and floors the size of a football field packed with identical workstations.

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## Draw on the Past to Reinvent the Future

Innovation in the places where we work, like the cars we drive, is shaped by the fact that the past exists in the present and the edge influences the center. Today's family car, equipped with rack-and-pinion steering, antilock brakes, and aluminum and graphite panels and parts originated in race cars and jet fighters. The modern home-based telecommuter has something in common with a thirteenth-century monk who worked from "home." The suburban house with the office above the garage shares lineage with the neighborhood shop over which the proprietor and his family lived. Peter Drucker argues that if you want to predict the future, look around you today.<sup>1</sup> Whether it's to build an innovative place to work, or innovative products and services, managers must observe and understand the world around them.

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## Raise Your Aspirations

As we embark on the twenty-first century, at least in the developed countries, the sweatshop has been replaced for the most part with bright, clean, and comfortable space. Rarely do contemporary offices endanger our health on a daily basis. Few of the places where we do office work horrify us; occasionally they energize us. Typically, they simply bore us to tears. As individuals, and organizations, we don't have to make such a stark choice. We don't, because the office as we know it as an invention, and like any other invention it can be reinvented. By designing our offices with imagination and grounding the design in an understanding of the ecology of work and workers, we can do better than create places that (as Florence Nightingale advocated for hospitals) do no harm. We need to raise our aspirations.

Minimally, where we work should be part of a healthy ecosystem in which we as individuals, teams, and organizations can not just survive or be productive but flourish. Yet when I ask friends, students, and colleagues about their image of an ideal place to work, it's like opening a faucet with low pressure: a little stream of ideas quickly peters out. Ask them about their ideal home and it's like opening a fire hydrant: complex images and stories pour out in an endless stream of energy and enthusiasm. Given how much time we spend working, there's no good rationale for the places where we work to engender such a barren mindscape.

The answer isn't likely to be found in high-tech gizmos. How many of us are excited by a future that offers sensors that automatically control lighting and temperature, adjust our chairs, and turn on and off green and red lights to let others know when they can approach? Does this kind of technoworld inspire passion, enthusiasm, or commitment? The effort millions of employees spend personalizing their workstation with photos of children, dogs, their summer vacation, and sports and entertainment celebrities suggests a desire for something more than functionality in the place they work, no matter how whiz bang it may be.

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## Exploit Disequilibrium

We need to understand the context in which our organizations operate, but it isn't necessary to flash-freeze an older and more familiar world, or try to tame the unruly one we live in today. Forces for disequilibrium abound—among the foremost information technology, which continues to transform our everyday lives. The invention of the telegraph, and then the telephone at the beginning of the last century, accelerated enormously our ability to communicate at a distance. Cellular telephones, pagers, and the Internet seemingly eliminate the barriers of time and space. We can work from anywhere and everywhere, easily accessing an astonishing amount of information. But how we plan, design, and manage the place where we work needs to catch up with how we actually perform our work. Frank Duffy argues that although there has been a renaissance in organization theory, “the design of the vast majority of office buildings has stayed physically more or less exactly where office design began.”<sup>2</sup> With the possible exception of Northern Europe, Duffy writes, “Facilities managers share with architects and designers a great deal of responsibility for what is, by any standard, an astonishing case of conservatism.”

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## Why Is Workspace Change So Slow?

The slow pace of change in how we plan, design, and manage our workspace, Frank Duffy argues, stems from managers' still believing that:

- Workers have to be constantly supervised.
- Advances up the organizational hierarchy must be marked with more space and better furniture.
- Departments and functions should be kept separated.
- Quasi-monopolies should control information flow.
- “Presenteeism” is better than “absenteeism.”
- Home and work are two irreconcilable worlds; commuting is the natural state of mankind.

We all live in the twenty-first century, but many organizations continue to inhabit a nineteenth-century mind-set about work and the workplace. Despite shattering advances in technology and our attitude about family, work, and society, these older and often unstated values lurk just beneath the surface of organizational life. Like a submerged wreck that gouges holes in the hulls of unsuspecting passing ships, these time-worn values retard progress. In Duffy’s words:

In the age of the Internet, at the dawn of the knowledge-based society, it is strange that we tolerate buildings . . . that assume that everyone comes in at nine and leaves at five, and sits solidly at a desk for five days a week. The model, of course, is still the factory where foremen had to put enormous emphasis on synchrony to force a barely literate proletariat to work at the loom and the lathe. When the bell rings the work begins. When the siren blows it is over—for the day . . . rolling out formulaic solutions has become the norm in office design.

Organizational leaders with a nineteenth-century mind-set contribute to dulling the advance of new, healthier, more engaging, and more mobile ways of working. There is disparity, however, among what is technically possible with modern telecommunications, what people care about, what makes them effective in doing their work, and what motivates downright resistance to change of any sort. We need to separate surface from substratum if we want to identify what fails because it fundamentally undermines the ability to work productively (in which case failure serves a valuable purpose) and what generates resistance because it challenges the familiar. What wins out over time is whatever demonstrably works better than what came before it.

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## **In a Global Economy, Scan the Globe**

In a global economy, lessons about what works better can come from anywhere. Long before American office planners realized the advantages of “universal plan” (same-size) offices for managing employee churn, the Swedes gave the same-sized office to

virtually every employee. They did it by inventing what they called the “combi office.” To gain the quiet of a closed office and the high visibility and transparency associated with an open office, the combi office combined a standard-size cellular (closed) office of about one hundred square feet with a sliding glass door. The Swedes did this not because of research demonstrating that sitting in an office with real walls, near an operable window and natural daylight, or having beautifully designed furniture, increased productivity a few percentage points. The idea that every aspect of the environment must be justified by direct utility or efficiency is peculiarly American.

Rather, the Swedes did it because offering a beautiful, comfortable office was considered the right (decent) thing to do in a society that values the dignity of its workers. I can still remember my slack-jawed astonishment the first time a Swedish manager wondered aloud why I would even question the practice of assigning a secretary the same space as an engineer or human resource manager. “Don’t they all contribute to the organization’s success?” he asked me. If they did, why would you give anyone a demonstrably lower-quality working environment for no reason other than to distinguish rank and status? “Wouldn’t this undermine their morale and commitment to the organization?” he persisted.

Swedish offices succeed at many levels. We’ve adopted them in the form of the universal plan office because they use space efficiently. The same-size office reduces the cost of churn because it’s easy to move people in, out, and around the organization rather than move walls or panels to accommodate these changes over time. Small but uniformly sized offices distribute space more evenly across the organizational hierarchy than the space-by-rank approach, which can easily result in something like 40 percent of the employees occupying 60 percent of the space. An added bonus of the more egalitarian approach is the environmental message that the corporate leadership considers everyone in the organization valuable, not just its higher-level managers.

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## Leverage Benefits; Succeed on Multiple Levels

As with Scandinavian offices that are beautiful, functional, and cost-effective, the challenge is to create a workspace ecosystem that functions on multiple levels, from the individual and team to the organization as a whole. IDEO, a firm renowned for its ability to develop category-busting new products (such as the design for the Palm Pilot), does just that. The office feels more like a play space than a workspace, but that’s because play is so critical to creative thinking.<sup>3</sup> It’s hard to think outside the box when you’re in one. IDEO’s offices generate lots of interest because they are so different. They contribute to the brand and to public visibility. But they also help attract the best and brightest talent, without which the company could never succeed. Once at work, talent is encouraged by the space to share ideas, to interact freely and often. The space is flexible and costs less

than would a high-end, more conventional corporate environment. Design, values, work processes, marketing, and learning reinforce each other and work in harmony. IDEO's leadership leverages every facet of the workplace because they understand and pay attention to how the whole ecosystem works, not to just a few selected parts.

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## Leverage Workspace Solutions

High-performance workspace strategies succeed on many levels at once. Each benefit leverages another.

- Cost
- Flexibility
- Branding
- Attraction and retention
- Teaming and collaboration

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## Nurture the Organization

Getting an organization's ecology right is like planning a garden. Gardeners don't plant rhododendron in the sun, sunflowers in the shade, or roses in the swampy bit of the garden in the expectation that they will "just get on with it." They select plants that thrive under the conditions the garden affords. By exploiting the garden's natural variations, they create a diverse, healthy, sustainable plant community, one that over time gets better and better. Good gardeners constantly experiment. They place plants in a number of locations, in varying combinations. They observe the result, and if it doesn't work, they replant, reorganize, and replace. They graft to create new varieties. The old resides with the new, and it is the overall pattern—the landscape, not the individual plant—that creates the total effect. A good office, like a good garden, requires tending. On its own it will go to seed, become overgrown, and finally perish.

Ultimately, the offices we invent are shaped by an intricate web of relationships; events; and financial, technical, and human factors interpreted in light of individual, professional, corporate, and societal values and attitudes. Aligned and in harmony, the organization, like the garden, flourishes. A workspace strategy at odds with other organizational values, policies, and practices wastes time, money, and energy. What works isn't always what common sense might suggest.

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## Benchmark the Whole System

Invariably, what works depends on the organizational context. That's why, as managers develop new workspace strategies, they must beware of a popular business tool: benchmarking. Following the lead of others can yield disastrous results. It is not that we shouldn't try to learn from others' experience. Rather, it is that we need to understand the particular ecological system within which a given strategy succeeds. In the case of workspace, this means understanding not just the workstation design but the organizational culture, management and employment policies and practices, and the nature of the work and workers.

### Avoid Benchmarking Traps

When you learn about what other admired companies are doing, also understand the context in which their particular policies and practices exist. Consider:

- Organizational culture
- Workforce demographics
- Technological sophistication
- Regulatory environment
- Market forces
- Stability or uncertainty of operating conditions

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### Embrace Paradox

As John Naisbut and Patricia Aburdene argued more than a decade ago<sup>4</sup> and others have done more recently, a more fruitful approach than trying to ignore or suppress complexity lies in both-and rather than either-or thinking and solutions. It's what I call "complementary opposites." The Chinese call it yin and yang. We don't have to choose between what appear to be diametrically opposed points on a spectrum: decentralization or centralization, standardization or choice, individual or team. Harness both to improve performance. Take the layout of offices. Selecting a single modular furniture system standardizes purchasing across the corporation and benefits from discounts associated with national contracts. Yet units within the firm—and even teams and groups within a unit—can arrange the furniture to suit their own workstyles and work processes. The key is first to select a furniture system that employees themselves can reconfigure with genuine ease. Second, and equally important, managers must encourage individuals and

groups to manipulate their work environment because it is one of the most direct and visible means a company has at its disposal to demonstrate that it trusts employees and will give them the tools they need to work productively.

We frame decisions in terms of either-or choices in part because the alternative seems to make the world more complex. In a corporate world where people feel over-taxed and underresourced, any proposition that appears to make the daily world more complex isn't going to win many hearts and minds. A mind-shift is needed, one accepting that simplicity sometimes comes with and benefits from variety and choice, not at its expense. Embracing paradox can take less energy and generate more motivation than pretending it doesn't exist or trying to suppress it. Healthy ecosystems require and thrive on diversity. Think of workspace as you would a financial portfolio: never put all your eggs in one basket. Good advice for your financial investments; so too for your workspace strategy.

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## Implications for Practice

- Start significant workspace interventions by analyzing existing and emerging trends in work processes, organizational culture, workforce demographics, and information technologies. Identify business challenges, which can range from potential merger and acquisition to shifting market, political, and economic conditions.
- Don't assume current workspace solutions must be working because there is no dramatic failure evident. Workspace solutions are rarely life-threatening, but they can cause the four D's: significant disruption, dysfunction, discomfort, and dissatisfaction.
- Create project teams that involve people in the planning and design process, including architects and designers who have not specialized in office planning and design. They are more likely to think of fresh solutions because they are not so grounded in what constitutes "good" (as in: familiar) office design.
- Balance what's possible with what's feasible. The whole organization's workspace strategy doesn't need to change in one fell swoop (and rarely does). It advances incrementally, even though some of the small steps may feel like radical change at first.